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The Infiltration of Jemaah Islamiyah into Indonesian State and Society

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Bandung in West Java was intended for the bombing of Shi'ites, who are increasingly under threat by organisations like JI which preach anti-Shi'ism. Photo by Fikri Rasyid on Unsplash.

SYNOPSIS

Jemaah Islamiyah's ability to infiltrate the building blocks of Indonesian society and its mainstream religious institutions is innovative. It is an indication that JI is intent on ensuring its survival by strengthening its roots within mainstream religious organisations and adopting an agenda of embedding itself within Indonesia's local context.

COMMENTARY

On 17 November 2021, Densus 88 (Indonesia's anti-terror detachment in the National Police) announced the arrest of three individuals. They were all holding significant roles in national and social entities and organisations, and are believed to have supported terrorist activities in East Java. They were alleged to have [raised funds for Jemaah Islamiyah \(JI\)](#). On [26 November 2021](#), a more extensive operation was conducted, netting a further 24 individuals suspected of fundraising for JI to the tune of more than US\$2 million annually.

The Key Persons Arrested

Farid Ahmad Okbah is [chairman and co-founder](#) of Partai Dakwah Rakyat Indonesia (PDRI). He has been a [member](#) of the Council of Young Intellectuals and Indonesian Ulema (MIUMI). Farid is also the [director](#) of Yayasan Al Islam, Bekasi. Among the first batch of students graduating in the 1980s from the Islamic and Arabic College of Indonesia (LIPIA), which is known to be backed by Saudi Arabia, Farid is regarded as "[pakar Syiah](#)" or an "expert" — or critic — on Shi'ism.

Since 2012, Farid had been calling for the [banning](#) of the Shi'ite movement in Indonesia. Influenced by the 2011 conflict in Syria, when Shi'ites were seen to be persecuting the Sunnis, his views mirror similar anti-Shi'ite rhetoric of various global jihadist groups, and propagated their application to the Indonesian context.

Anung Al-Hamat is a leading member of PDRI and doubles as one of JI's top administrators in his capacity as founder and member of the supervisory board for [Perisai Nusantara Esa \(Shield of Nusantara Esa\)](#), which operates as a legal aid organisation for arrested JI members. His [biography](#) indicates that he graduated with a [doctoral degree](#) in Islamic Education from Universitas Ibn Khaldun Bogor, West Java. His undergraduate training was in Hadith at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

Anung published [The Book of Tarbiyah Jihadiyah Imam Bukhari](#), based on his [academic article](#) that examines the above-mentioned concept in Islamic education, and its significance in Indonesia's independence struggle. In the book, Anung argues that jihad education should be made mandatory for all educators, teachers and states.

[Ahmad Zain An-Najah](#), is a [member](#) of the fatwa commission of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, or Indonesia Ulema Council), and an [alumnus](#) of the Pesantren Al-Mukmin, Ngruki established by JI founders Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. Ahmad also held key positions in several *pesantren* and institutions in Indonesia. [He claims](#) to have graduated with a doctorate summa cum laude and master's degree from Cairo's Al-Azhar University, plus an undergraduate degree from the Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia.

Ahmad supports the [idea](#) — which parallels the policies of Chechen separatists, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and Boko Haram in Nigeria — that Indonesian Muslim women could partake in jihad in Muslim countries but primarily in a supporting capacity. He has also argued that once jihad has become obligatory, women able to take up arms must

participate in armed jihad and do not require permission from their husband or guardian.

Through his statements and writings, Ahmad had earlier argued for the [delegitimisation](#) of the position of the Indonesian legislative bodies, the People's Consultative Assembly and the People's Representative Council, on the grounds that they had many practices, religious edicts/opinions and stances that supported non-Muslim systems of governance. He rejected the non-Muslim membership in the Indonesian Parliament on grounds that such participation was not in accordance with the "Islamic" standard of leadership and governance. Nevertheless, Ahmad himself was amply qualified for his position in MUI and his arrest is the most disconcerting of the three.

How Are the Three Connected?

Reports indicate that the three individuals connected with JI through the [Baitul Maal Abdurrahman Bin Auf \(BM ABA\)](#). BM ABA is an [institution](#) that manages alms, donations and disbursements under the Abdurrahman bin Auf Foundation. BM ABA has an alms collection wing, LAZ BM ABA, which is [licensed](#) by the National Amil Zakat Agency (Baznas) on the authority of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag).

Several charitable organisations in Indonesia are known to be part of the JI network and they often seek public sympathy and garner support through their humanitarian programmes and missions. BM ABA is one such organisation; it has a [programme](#) called Jihad Global, which aims to finance young individuals connected to JI to go abroad to receive training, thereby building the group's military capability. Ahmad and Farid were on the BM ABA [Sharia Council](#), while Farid and Anung were identified via a trail linked to a 2018 [donation](#) worth Rp 10 million (about S\$1,000) from LAZ BM ABA to Perisai Nusantara Esa.

How JI Got into the Mainstream

JI's traditional image — as a transnational terrorist movement linked with Al-Qaeda and associated with the increased "Arabisation" in the region, as well as the influence of Pan-Arabist movements, Salafism and Wahhabism — is now considered passé. For JI to gain acceptance in Indonesia, it had to embed itself within the Indonesian mainstream groups, and by repackaging the ideal of global jihad to the Indonesian context. It appears to have done precisely that, by infiltrating the MUI.

Founded in Jakarta on 26 July 1975 during the New Order era, MUI is Indonesia's top body for Islamic scholars. MUI issues fatwas to the Islamic community, dictating the general direction of Islamic life in Indonesia. With the collapse of Suharto's regime in 1998, changes in civil society have widened the role of the MUI and made it more complex. MUI has evolved towards a more active role by functioning as the protector of Muslim interests and a critical partner of the Indonesian government. It has become a trusted conduit between Muslim communities and the national government.

MUI's place in the Indonesian Islamic firmament is so pivotal that in the 2019 presidential election, President Joko Widodo selected the then-sitting MUI leader

Ma'ruf Amin to become his running mate to shore up his Islamic credentials. Today, Ma'ruf is the vice-president of Indonesia.

Jl now functions within the country's legal and social frameworks. Jl may not promote or represent itself as an anti-government movement or as being against the non-Muslims; nonetheless, the evidence manifest in its propaganda and activities suggests otherwise. The Densus 88 arrests attest that Jl has infiltrated the building blocks of Indonesian society and its mainstream religious institutions.

What Are the Implications?

Local narratives of jihad have an appeal to Indonesians. They relate more readily to such accounts which are different from typical transnational narratives often regarded as detached from their own traditional settings. Religious opinions on armed jihad and the threat from the Shi'ites reinforce the perception of an Indonesian Islam that is under siege from external forces. These messages are subtle, and yet could evoke suspicion of political institutions and hatred towards non-Muslims. They sow negative attitudes and false ideas about the beliefs of fellow Indonesians from different faiths. Extremists could then exploit the opportunities to undermine the Pancasila state and the ethos of unity in diversity.

The arrested individuals are not ordinary persons. They are persons of high calibre with recognised Islamic educational qualifications. Two of them are graduates from the Al-Azhar, an acclaimed university in Egypt with a very strong moderate (*wasatiya*) character. Segments of Indonesian Muslims have been directly influenced by the interpretations of Islam acquired from Egypt. There are political and religious leaders who studied in Egypt and they play crucial roles in Islamic mass organisations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). The recent arrests highlight how graduating from Al-Azhar alone is no guarantee of moderate Islamic views.

The profiles of those arrested, their personal histories, their affiliations with Jl and their views of jihad are well known. That they have been arrested so publicly indicates a determination on the part of the Indonesian authorities to not let them propagate radical religious views without consequence.

Jl now looks and acts differently as compared with the organisation it once was under Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. It has suffered from a dearth of strategic thinkers able to present a strategy befitting the new era. Old-school transnational jihadists, led by the previous generations, will find that their ideas face strong headwinds. The latest arrests, however, indicate that those in charge in Jakarta are taking no chances as they view Jl's changes in strategy and vision of Islam and political identity as a challenge and threat to Indonesian state and society.

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